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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000780

SIPDIS

DRL/IRF FOR COFSKY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/06/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KIRF AG

SUBJECT: EVANGELICAL CONVERTS RECEIVE FINES, SUSPENDED PRISON SENTENCE

REF: A. ALGIERS 625

1B. ALGIERS 333

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Two Algerian Christians, Rachid Seghir and Djammal Dahmani, were convicted on July 2 of proselytizing and illegally practicing a non-Muslim religion. The Algerian court fined the defendants 100,000 dinars (1,540 USD) and handed out six-month suspended prison sentences. Non-Muslim religious leaders have publicly criticized the court's decision and noted that several other trials against Evangelicals are still pending, including the case of Protestant convert Habiba Kouider. Meanwhile, the Algerian press has continued to run negative stories on the Evangelical movement, most recently in a July 7 full-page article in a local French-language daily. According to the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Algeria, official pressure on Evangelicals is likely to increase in the near future. END SUMMARY.

SAVE A PRAYER

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12. (U) A court in Tissemsilt sentenced two Algerian Christian converts on July 2 to a six-month suspended prison term and fined each 100,000 dinars (approx. 1,540 USD). The defendants, Rachid Seghir and Djammal Dahmani, originally faced two years in prison and fines of over 7,000 USD after the same court convicted them in absentia in November 2007 of proselytizing and illegally practicing a non-Muslim faith. Algerian authorities charged the two Evangelical Christians in 2007 after police discovered bibles in Seghir and Dahmani's car at a routine check-point near Tissemsilt. Algerian law provides for a maximum of five years in prison and fines of up to 15,570 USD for violating Ordinance 06-03, which prohibits proselytizing to Muslims and sets constraints on non-Muslim worship. Seghir and Dahmani's lawyer, Khadidja Khalafoun, told us that she plans to appeal the court's decision.

13. (U) Mustapha Krim, the president of the Protestant Church of Algeria, publicly criticized the court ruling and noted that a half a dozen cases against Evangelicals were still pending in Algerian courts. The Tiaret court responsible for the case of Protestant convert Habiba Kouider (also represented by Khadidja Khalafoun) has yet to render a decision (ref A) and, according to other press reports,

another trial involving Seghir and three other evangelicals is scheduled on July 15.

EVANGELICALS STILL IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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**¶4.** (U) The Evangelical movement continues to receive negative coverage in the Algerian press. A local French-language daily, La Tribune, ran a full-page story on July 7 describing the presence of Evangelicals in Algeria. The paper characterized Western countries' ardent promotion of religious freedom as a tool aimed at dividing Algerian society and compared present-day Evangelists to missionaries who arrived in Algeria during French colonial rule. At a July 7 press conference to announce the agenda of his party's national congress, the National Secretary of the opposition Socialist Forces Front (FFS), Karim Tabbou, claimed that "tons" of Bibles and other religious material have been brought into Algeria through the port of Algiers and cited evangelism as a social issue his party should address. Tabbou said that converts like Habiba Kouider undermine Algerian national unity. Mohamed Houdeibi, an MP from the Islamist party Ennahda, was quoted in the Arabic daily Echourouk el-Youmi on June 29 referring to proselytizing as a campaign sponsored by foreign parties aimed at infiltrating Algerian society.

**¶5.** (C) During a July 6 meeting with poloff, the president of the Seventh Day Adventist Church of Algeria, Pierre Pechoux, commented that the Tissemsilt court's July 2 ruling on the Seghir/Dahmani case came as no surprise. Pechoux noted that

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the trend in trials against Evangelicals has been to deliver reduced sentences that impose fines rather than prison time. That said, Pechoux did not view the decision in the Tissemsilt case as a sign that the Algerian authorities were softening their stance on evangelism. Pechoux said that he expected prosecutions to continue and pressure on Evangelicals to increase.

COMMENT

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**¶6.** (C) As we have reported (ref B), Algerian paranoia surrounding Christian proselytizing greatly exaggerates the actual size and presence of Christian churches in Algerian society. The flurry generated by the Evangelical movement reflects many Algerians' suspicion of such activities, which some politicians are choosing to portray as interference in the country's domestic affairs. Despite the fiery rhetoric, Pierre Pechoux said he continues to have regular, cordial meetings with representatives of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and believed his contacts from the other official churches in Algeria have had the same experience. Pechoux added that Religious Affairs Minister Bouabdallah Ghoulamallah invited him to attend the next meeting of an inter-ministerial accreditation commission, which Pechoux took as a goodwill gesture toward his church.

DAUGHTON